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Obituary: Douglas McBroom cared deeply about law clients

In a long and varied legal career, one of Mr. McBroom's biggest cases led to safety changes in the Seattle Public Schools football program.

By [Steve Miletich](#), Seattle Times staff reporter



Douglas McBroom was a Superior Court judge.

Douglas McBroom was a lawyer who fought for the underdog, cared deeply about his clients and swayed juries because of his trustworthy persona.

Overall, he was a “loving person,” said Seattle attorney Kristin Houser, a close associate of Mr. McBroom, who died Nov. 16 of a suspected pulmonary embolism at age 73.

“I know people say that when someone dies,” Houser said, but he was “just a lovely man, a great person, very honest.”

Among his clients was Chris Thompson, who in 1975 was a West Seattle High School sophomore when he suffered a devastating spinal-cord injury during a football game that left him a quadriplegic.

A jury awarded \$6.3 million to Thompson in 1982, but the lawsuit against the Seattle Public Schools had larger reverberations when it paved the way for safety changes that remain in effect today.

Thompson, now 53 and living part time in Southern California, said Thursday he was preparing to fly to Seattle to attend a celebration of Mr. McBroom's life on Sunday.

"He absolutely changed my life. He's a giant," Thompson said.

Thompson gained financial freedom that allowed him to pursue costly physical therapy throughout his life.

Moreover, the two remained friends and in 2007 Mr. McBroom, who had become a judge, married Thompson to his bride in Thompson's family home in Seattle.

"I really think we took pride in that we made a difference," Thompson said, citing new measures that taught football players not to lower their head when making contact.

Mr. McBroom brought that compassion to the bench when he was elected a King County Superior Court judge in 2000, where he served until his retirement in 2009.

"He was just not some highfalutin' judge sitting on the bench," said his daughter, Mo McBroom, 42, who got her own law degree. "I think he really related to the people who appeared before him."

With his own family, she said, "he always found something to be excited about."

Douglas Durgan McBroom was raised in Spokane by his parents, Mildred and Richard McBroom. He earned his bachelor's and law degrees at the University of Chicago.

In 1966, Mr. McBroom married his wife, Judith Hall McBroom, and began his legal career in Pittsburgh, where he served as a police adviser teaching officers about new civil-rights laws and worked for a short time in the U.S. Attorney's Office.

He then moved to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Seattle, where he and his brother, Dick, worked as prosecutors on government corruption and organized-crime cases. In 1971, he obtained one of the early convictions against the racketeer Frank Colacurcio Sr.

After leaving in 1972 to work as the chief criminal deputy prosecutor in Pierce County, Mr. McBroom entered private practice in 1975 as a partner at the Seattle law firm Schroeter Goldmark & Bender, where he practiced personal-injury law for many years and took on Thompson's case.

When the firm ran into financial trouble, Thompson recalled, some of the partners wanted to drop what they saw as a risky case.

"Doug was the one who defended keeping the case and going forward with it," Thompson said.

As part of a \$3.8 settlement to avoid an appeal after the verdict, Thompson was paid \$1 million and a monthly annuity. The legal fee totaled \$1.5 million.

“We became very close during the case,” Thompson said, describing Mr. McBroom as “somewhere between a big brother and father figure to me.”

Houser, who worked with Mr. McBroom for 17 years at the Schroeter Goldmark, said Thompson’s desire to attend Sunday’s gathering was a “tribute to the kind of relationship Doug had with his clients.”

Like his family, Mr. McBroom loved his clients unconditionally, even with their foibles and flaws, and was the “heart of the firm,” Houser said.

The celebration of Mr. McBroom’s life will be held at 3 p.m. Sunday at the Mount Baker Community Club in the Seattle neighborhood where he lived. Contributions can be made to the club’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship Fund: 2811 Mount Rainier Drive S., Seattle, WA 98114.

Mr. McBroom is survived by his 102-year-old mother; his wife; his daughter and her husband, Will Hughes; another daughter, Kathleen Kellet McBroom and her husband, Kevin Wood; three grandsons; a sister-in-law; and a niece and nephew. He was preceded in death by his brother in 1971.

Seattle Times news researcher Gene Balk contributed to this story, which contains material from *The Seattle Times* archives.

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